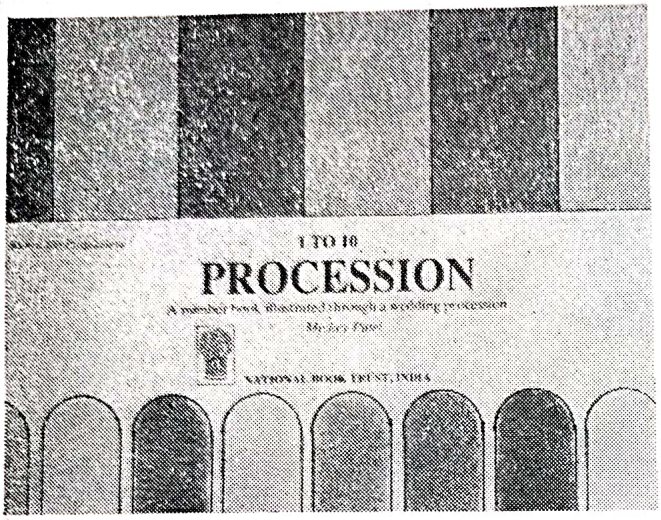
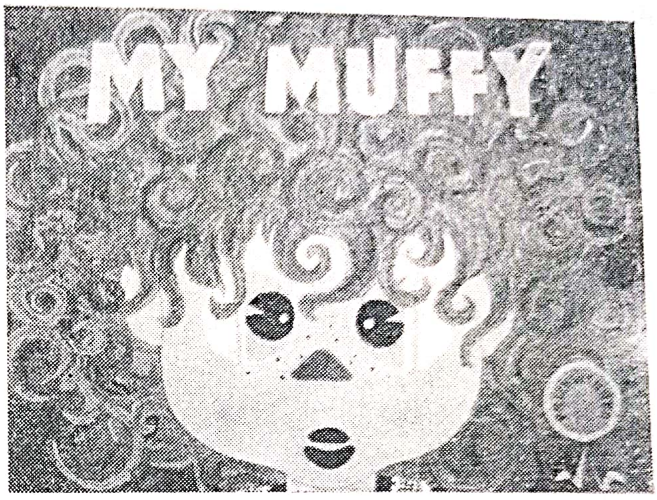
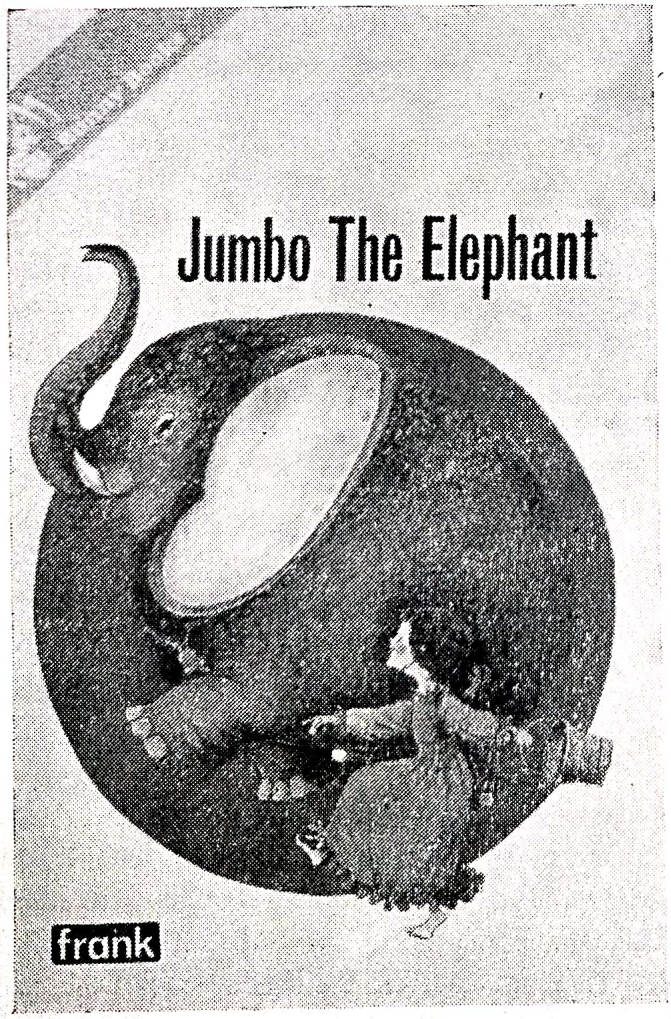
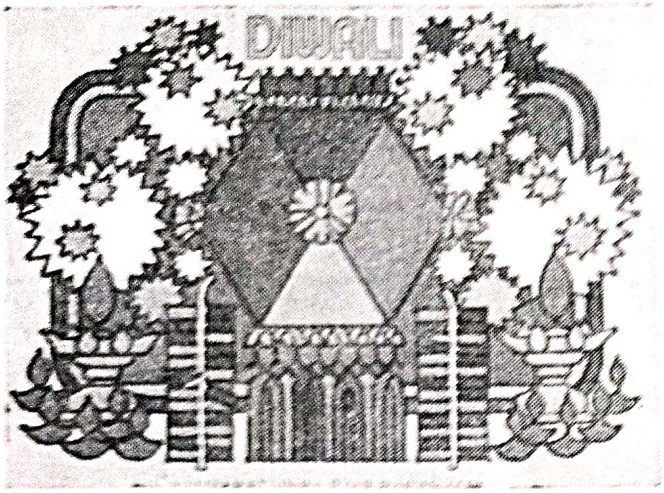
BOOKS FOR PRE—SCHOOL CHILDREN

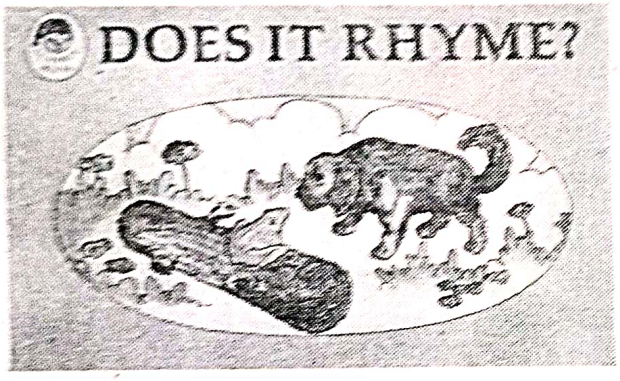
—NAVIN MENON





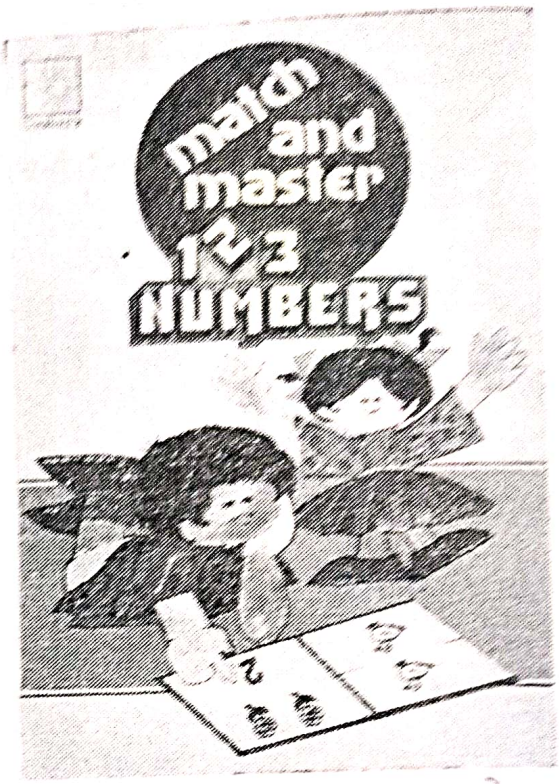






To a three or four year old child, 'reading' a book does not always mean deciphering words or marking the letters A, B or C. To a child of that age, 'reading' means relating to the text, understanding the pictures and making up a story. If the author's story-line happens to fall in line with the child's imagination, so much the better! Otherwise, it would not make a difference to him ! He treats it as a friend talking to it, confiding in it and laughing with it—taking it along whenever he goes —to the park, to the market, to the bed, to the bath !

It was probably with this in mind that publishers abroad, made special books for this age-group. They were in plastic, of spongy material, even on cloth, 50 that they could be wiped, washed, dried or ironed in case they got soiled. In fact, the purpose was to do anything just to make them child's inseparable companions.

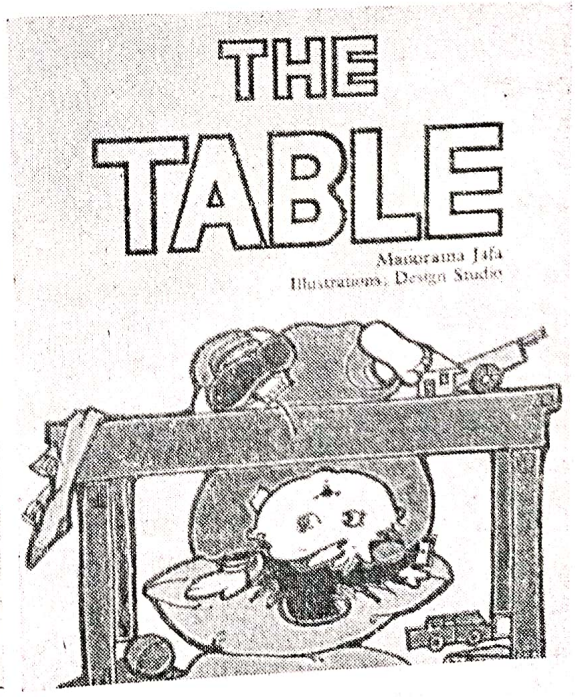


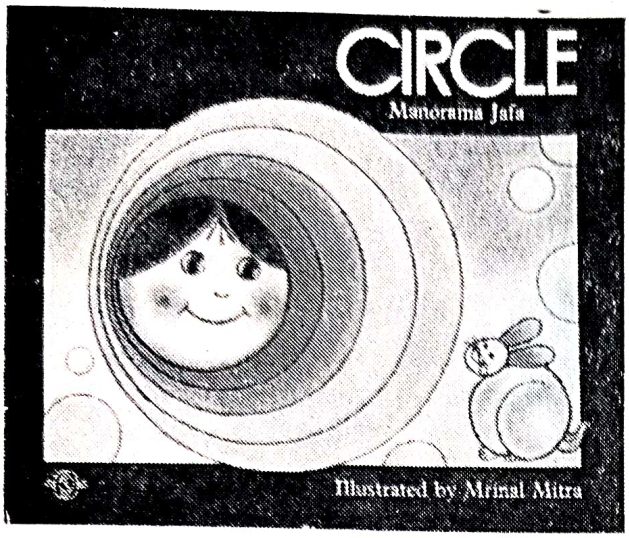
Unfortunately in India, we have never had any such a tradition. Books were meant only for those who could read and certainly not for a child who did not know the first thing of reading.

But now we are seeing the winds of change. Thanks to a few enterprising prising parents, who expressed a need for them and to publishers who took the cue from them. Till recently, the concentration was on picture books—books for the 5-8 age-group. These books, by themselves are okay as far as the contents are concerned and do well for the intended age-group. But when the same are forced on a 2 or 3 year old child who is just about learning words and the meaning of them, they could seem a big puzzle. For, he would not be able to comprehend either the text or the details in the illustrations. Since he neither has the vocabulary nor the attention span.

It is heartening to note, therefore, that there is something exclusively for 2-4 year olds in the market today besides the usual Number Books and Alphabet Books. They are concept books, and easy-to-follow pic-

ture books. Each book is well-illustrated and the words carefully chosen, so that they are not heavy on little mouths. I have a variety of them lying before me now and though it would not be possible to take almost each one of them at length, I shall still try and give an idea of the ones that went down well with my own two nursery children. Having grown up on a diet of CBT books, they found books by some other publishers equally stimulating and captivating. Like for instance, Homes by the National Book Trust. Though I personally felt the concept was a bit difficult for a 3 or 4 year old to comprehend,—it is just visual depictions of Homes of various creatures, big and small, some funny, some absurd—yet my son who is 4, lapped it up with great relish, possibly because I explained each visual to him in detail and he grasped the humour ! At the same time, some of the illustrations are quite good—plain and simple, and do not need much explanation. Procession by Mickey Patel is another one he enjoyed. He thought it was good for counting all the people who





were joining the 'Baraat'. Sigrun Srivastava's *What is Right and What is Wrong* was enjoyed more by my 6½ year old daughter than my son. It depicts the experiences of a little girl who sees the world topsyturvy the moment she wears a pair of spectacles! *This is Rajasthan* and *Animal World* sadly did not find favour with either my son or daughter and their interest stayed only till they had seen the most gorgeous illustrations of Rajasthan and the ornamental illustrations of the Animal World. Beyond that, they could not stay with the books, because the text repeats what they have already read several times.

"Mix and Match" books were again "unputdownables." This was an activity which both of them enjoyed tremendously. These books are small in size and two publishers have brought them out. One is creative educational Aids Pvt. Ltd., Janakpuri (Mix and Match ABC, Mix and Match 1, 2 3 and Mix and Match Shapes and Colours) and the other two are by IBH Publishing Company, Bombay *(Does it Rhyme* and *Quite the Opposite)*. Bunny Books by Frank Brothers also kept them laughing for quite some time.

But, alone the biggest hits were Ratna Sagars latest publications—"Shishu Books" especially produced for the 2-4 age group. These are a set of six books in English and Hindi with straightforward text, minimum words and plain, simple, realistic illustrations. Their titles are Circle, *The Parrot, Lalu and Peelu, Hira, The Table* and *Tree Growers.* When I showed the book *Circle* to my four year old son, he jumped with joy. *"Circle!"* he said excitedly "See! I can read now!" No, my son had not read the book in so many words (or letters?) because he has not learnt to read as yet. But he had understood what it had to say, by the very descriptive cover illustration—half a dozen circles with a smiling face drawn within.

We read the book together, page by page. At the end of each page, he paused to add two or three things which he recalled as being round.

The game went on and suddenly he stopped short ... "Mummy! See! my name also has a circle in it!" And he laboriously wrote out his name R.O.H.A.N. That was the biggest pat for the author, Manorama Jafa. She had managed to explain the concept of a 'circle' without being too preachy or pompous as if to suggest, "look here, listen to me, I know it all!"

Apart from being absolutely simple and pictorial, the narration is also very informal. It prods the child to think . . .

A grandmother draws a circle. She shows it to her grand-daughter. The grand-daughter draws one too. Then they play around with it, till the child is drawing not merely circles but the 'shape' of many things.

The second book, *The Parrot* by Mukta Munjal is again meant for the 2-5 age group but has a lesson in it for the adults as well.

In this day and age when so much is being written on wild life and preservation of wild life and saving our environment, a book like this does not come as a surprise. But what comes as a surprise is the delicate handling of the theme which should haunt many of us for a long, long time.

We all like pets. We all want to acquire

them for our own. We all want to show them off as well. But what happens after that? Do we all feel for them? Unfortunately no. Our job ends, when we have paid for them. Provided the leash and rations for them are taken care of. We do not think beyond that. "Would they be missing their home, their shelter, or they want to stay in captivity?" Well, really! If we think like that, we could not have acquired them in the first place.

No, keeping pets is not always wrong. To provide "Home" to a hungry, ailing animal is certainly within the norms. But, to capture a free bird or a missing pup or kitten would be very, very unfair. "This is the theme of this "Shishu Book". *The Parrot* a suitable lesson for the young and old alike!

Lalu and Peelu is again a very sensitive story about two chicks, one named Lalu and the other named Peelu. Lalu is fond of red things and Peelu is fond of yellow. One day, Lalu sees a hed thing hanging from a tree and eats it. But, oh dear, it was a red chilly! Lalu's mouth starts burning. Peelu hears his brother crying and runs to him. He offers him a piece of yellow jaggery to eat which soothes Lalu. Very thoughtful of Peelu, was it not? I had to read this story no less than ten times in one evening to my kids, and each time they enjoyed it even more. Congratulations, to Vinita Krishna. She did a fine job!

The next in the series, *Hira*, is about a a baby elephant in the circus. His exploits, adventures and entries make reading this book too, a very enjoyable experience. No, it does not reflect on the training of the animal in the zoo, or the tricks he performs. The story takes place when the animals go out of their camp to spend a day in the jungle. And I know of two kids who are still laughing after reading this book.

The Table and *Tree Growers* are the other two books in the series. While the first is about the table and how a little baby sits under it and imagines all kinds of situations makes interesting observations.

The other is about the importance of growing trees. Set in Leh, the story line is very simple.

"Long ago there used to be no rains in Leh. So people grew trees. Now it rains, but only sometimes. We will plant more trees." It goes on to say how the teacher bought some seedlings (saplings it should have been) from a local nursery and gave each child one of them to plant. The children dug up the land and planted their trees. Then they put their names on it. Each child then was made responsible for his own tree. He watered it everyday. Many years later, the trees grew big and green and the school looked very beautiful. Also it rained a little more every year in the city of Leh! The only question my son had after listening intently to the story was ,"What happened to the names?" Perhaps the author has an answer to that.

The illustrations in each of these books are self-explanatory and pre-school children can easily understand what is 'written' in the book merely by following the illustrations. The artists Mrinal Mitra *(Circle, The Parrot, Tree Gaowers)*, Raboti Bhushan (*Lalu and Peelu*), Jagdish Joshi (*Hira*) and Design Studio (*The Table*) deserves a credit for that.

Having spoilt your suspense by revealing the contents, I cannot advocate their buying to you. But what I can cerainly do is to recommend their buying for your own little ones or any toddlers you know. Give them the books and observe their reactions. Let me know if you differ with me.

Besides these 'Shishu Books,' Ratna Sagar has brought out two books of little poems as well — *Khilte Geet* and *Nanhe Geet*. The poems are simple, easy to learn and can be set to music for the very small ones.

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Picture books offer a child new ways of seeing the world—its wonders, its magic its fun—and then again new ways of seeing the samething. Designing, type, printing, paper and binding also contribute to the artistic quality of the book.